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## THE CHEROKEE RIVER CULT.<sup>1</sup>

FROM the beginning of knowledge, Fire and Water, twin deities of the primitive pantheon, have occupied the fullest measure of man's religious thought, holding easy precedence over all other divinities. Others were gods of occasion, but these twain were the gods of very existence, and in a hundred varied and varying forms, whether as beneficent helpers in the cheering blaze and the soft-falling rain, or as terrible scourges in the consuming conflagration or the sweeping torrent, they were recognized always as embodiments of power, masters and conservators of life itself. If they differed in degree of honor, the first place must be given to water, without which life was impossible. In every cosmogony the world itself is born from the water, and the symbolic rite of purification by ablution was so much a part of the ancient systems that even the great teacher of Galilee declares that except a man be born of water he cannot enter the kingdom.

As the reverence for fire found its highest and most beautiful expression in sun worship, so the veneration for water developed into a cult of streams and springs. From the east to the extremest west, primitive man bowed low to the god of the river and the fountain, and a newer religion consecrated the rite that it could not destroy. The sacred river of the Hindu, the holy wells of Ireland, have their counterpart in the springs of the Arapaho and the Navajo, with their sacrificial scarfs and pottery fastened upon the overhanging branches or deposited upon the sandy bank.

In Cherokee ritual, the river is the Long Man, *Yŭñwŭ Gŭnahŭta*, a giant with his head in the foothills of the mountains and his foot far down in the lowland, pressing always, resistless and without stop, to a certain goal, and speaking ever in murmurs which only the priest may interpret. In the words of the sacred formulas, he holds all things in his hands and bears down all before him. His aid is

<sup>1</sup> Read before the Columbus meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, August, 1899.

invoked with prayer and fasting on every important occasion of life, from the very birth of the infant, in health and sickness, in war and love, in hunting and fishing, to ward off evil spells and to win success in friendly rivalries. Purification in the running stream is a part of every tribal function, for which reason the town-house, in the old days, was always erected close to the river bank.

We shall speak here of ceremonial rites in connection with the running stream, saying nothing of the use of water in the sweat-bath or in ordinary medico-religious practice, beyond noting the fact that in certain cases the water used by the doctor must be dipt out from a waterfall. Two distinct formulistic terms are used for the rite, one of which signifies "plunging into the water," the other "dipping up the water," nearly corresponding to our own "immersion" and "sprinkling" in baptism. Whenever possible, the priest selects a bend in the river where he can face toward the east and look up-stream while performing the ceremony, which usually takes place at sunrise, both priest and petitioner being still fasting.

When the new-born child is four days old, the mother brings it to the priest, who carries it in his arms to the river, and there, standing close to the water's edge and facing the rising sun, bends seven times toward the water, as though to plunge the child into it. He is careful, however, not to let the infant's body touch the cold water, as the sudden shock might be too much for it, but holds his breath the while he mentally recites a prayer for the health, long life, and future prosperity of the child. The prayer finisht, he hands the infant back to the mother, who then lightly rubs its face and breast with water dipt up from the stream. If for any reason the ceremony cannot be performed on the fourth day, it is postponed to the seventh, four and seven being the sacred numbers of the Cherokee.

At regular intervals, usually at each recurring new moon, it is customary among the more religiously disposed of the old conservatives, for the whole family to go down together at daybreak, and fasting, to the river and stand with bare feet just touching the water, while the priest, or, if properly instructed, the father of the household, stands behind them and recites a prayer for each in turn, after which they plunge in and bathe their whole bodies in the river. One of my interpreters, whose father was an acknowledged medicine-man, told me, with shivering recollection, how, as a child, he had been compelled to endure this ordeal every month, even in the depth of winter, when it was sometimes necessary to break a hole in the ice for the purpose. Following is a literal translation of one of the regular ritual prayers used on this occasion : —

"Listen ! O, now you have drawn near to hearken, O Long Man at rest. O helper of men, you let nothing slip from your grasp. You

never let the soul slip from your grasp. Come now and take a firmer grasp. I originated near the cataract, and from there I stretch out my hand toward this place. Now I have bathed in your body. Let the white foam cling to my head as I go about, and let the white staff be in my hand. Let the health-giving *âya* await me along the road. Now my soul stands erect in the seventh heaven. *Yû !*"

The declaration that the suppliant himself originated "near the cataract" is intended to emphasize his claims upon the assistance of the Long Man, who is held to speak to the initiated in the murmurs of the stream and the roar of the waterfall. The idea intended to be conveyed by the latter part of the prayer is that the petitioner, having bathed in the stream, comes out with the white foam still clinging to his head, and taking in his hand the "white staff — symbolic of old age and a long life — begins his journey to the seventh upper world, the final abode of the immortals. At first his progress is slow and halting, but strengthened by the health-giving *âya* (ambrosia) set out for him at intervals along the road, he is enabled at last to reach the goal, where his soul thereafter stands erect.

It is well-nigh impossible to render into English all the subtle meaning of the Cherokee formulistic original. Thus the verb translated here, *stands erect*, implies that the subject is now at last standing erect, after having for a long time staggered or crept along, like a sick man or an infant. Philologists acquainted with Indian languages will appreciate this difficulty. Moreover, many of the formulistic expressions occur only in the sacred rituals and are unintelligible to the laity. In the color symbolism of the tribe, *white* is emblematic of peace and happiness; *red*, of power and success; *blue*, of trouble and defeat; and *black*, of death.

When a member of a family dies, it is believed that the spirit is loath to leave the scenes of life and go alone upon the long journey to the Darkening Land in the west. It therefore hovers about for a time, seeking to draw to it the souls of those it has most loved on earth, that it may have company in the spirit land. Thus it is that the friends of the lost one pine and are sorrowful and refuse to eat, because the shadow-soul is pulling at their heartstrings, and unless the aid of the priest is invoked their strength will steadily diminish, their souls will be drawn from them, and they too will die. To break the hold of the spirit and to wash away the memory of the bereavement, so that they may have quick recovery, is one of the greatest functions of the medicine-man.

Following is one of the prayers used for this purpose, the address being to the Ancient White (the Fire), the Long Man (the River), and Gě'hyăgúga (the Sun): —

"THIS IS TO TAKE BEREAVED ONES TO WATER."

*Sgě!* O Ancient White, where you have let the soul slip from your grasp, it has dwindled away. Now his health has been restored and he shall live to be old. *Kŭ!*

*Sgě!* O Long Man, now you had let the soul slip from your grasp and it had dwindled away. Now his health has been restored and he shall live to be old.

In the first upper world, O *Gě'hyăgúga*, you have the tables. The white food shall be set out upon them. It shall be reached over and pushed away (*i. e.*, the client shall eat of the "white" or health-giving food, reaching across the tables in his eagerness, and pushing the food away from him when satisfied). His health has been restored and he shall live to be old.

In the second upper world, O *Gě'hyăgúga*, you have the tables. The white food shall be set out upon them. It shall be reached over and pushed away. His health has been restored and he shall live to be old.

In the third upper world, O *Gě'hyăgúga*, you have the tables. The white food shall be set out upon them. It shall be reached over and pushed away. His health has been restored and he shall live to be old.

In the fourth upper world, O *Gě'hyăgúga*, you have the tables. The white food shall be set out upon them. It shall be reached over and pushed away. His health has been restored and he shall live to be old.

In the fifth upper world, O *Gă'hyăgúga*, you have the tables. The white food shall be set out upon them. It shall be reached over and pushed away. His health has been restored and he shall live to be old.

In the sixth upper world, O *Gě'hyăgúga*, you have the tables. The white food shall be set out upon them. It shall be reached over and pushed away. His health has been restored and he shall live to be old.

In the seventh upper world, O *Gě'hyăgúga*, you have the tables. The white food has been set out upon them. It has been reached over. It has been pushed away. His health has been restored and he shall live to be old. *Yŭ!*

The first paragraph, addressed to the Fire, the "Ancient White," is recited by the priest inside the house of his clients, while standing in front of the fire and looking down into it, with his back turned to the members of the family, who stand in line with their backs turned toward him and their eyes looking out the door. He

has with him an assistant, who, at the conclusion of the final paragraph, ejaculates *Kū!* when the members of the family start in procession to go down to the water, followed by the doctor and the attendant.

On arriving at the stream, the persons for whose benefit the ceremony is intended stand in line side by side close to the water's edge, with their eyes intently fixed upon the stream, while the priest stands behind them with his hands outstretched and his eyes looking straight forward. He then recites the prayer to the "Long Man," the River, followed by the seven paragraphs addressed to *Gě'hyǎgúga*, the Sun, represented as the owner of tables spread with "white," or peace-bringing food, which the client eats and is restored to health. During this part of the ceremony the attendant is closely watching the appearance of the water in front of the clients for the distance of a "hand-length" (*awá'hilá*, a formulistic term, not always to be taken literally) from the shore. Should a stick, fish, or other object come within this limit during the recitation of the prayer, it is a sign that the death in the family was due to witchcraft. By certain signs in connection with the appearance of the object, the priest is enabled to guess the whereabouts, or even the name, of the secret enemy, who must then be proceeded against in another ceremony to neutralize any further evil conjurations. On the other hand, should the water appear clear, the death was due to ordinary circumstances, and no further ceremony is necessary.

As the priest mentions each in turn of the seven upper worlds, — each of which is figuratively said to be a "hand-length" above the last, — he raises his hands gradually higher, until, at the concluding paragraph, they are stretched high above his head. At the final *Yū!* his clients bend down with one accord, and, dipping up the water in their hands, lave their heads and breasts, or else, wading out into the stream, plunge their bodies completely under seven times.

Each "upper world" or heaven (*galá'ńlati*) symbolizes a definite period, usually one year or one month, according to the nature of the formula. In ceremonies for obtaining long life, the period is commonly one year. Should the omens in the water be propitious up to the mention of the third, fourth, or fifth upper world, the client will live three, four, or five years longer. If all goes well until he is raised up to the seventh or highest heaven, he may expect at least a seven years' lease of life, for beyond this limit the mental vision of the seer is unable to pierce the future. If, on the contrary, an unfavorable omen is perceived in the water during the recital, for instance, of the paragraph which raises the client to the fifth upper world, the priest knows that some great danger, possibly death itself, threatens

the man in five months or five years to come. This necessitates the immediate performance of another ceremony, accompanied by fasting and going to water, to turn aside the impending peril. The final result is generally successful, as the priest seldom ceases from his labors until the omens are propitious. Should it still be otherwise, after all his effort, he informs his client, who is often so completely under the force of the delusion that he not infrequently loses all courage, believing himself doomed by an inexorable fate, broods, sickens, and actually dies, thus fulfilling the prediction.

Chief among the sacred paraphernalia of the priests and conjurers are the beads used in connection with certain water ceremonies, more especially those for counteracting the evil spells of a secret enemy, or for compassing the death of a rival. The beads formerly used were the small glossy seeds of the Viper's Bugloss (*Echium vulgare*), superseded now by the ordinary beads of glass or porcelain. They are called by the formulistic name of *sá'nikta*, the regular term being *adélla*. They are of different symbolic colors, and are kept carefully wrapt in buckskin—or in cloth, in these degenerate days of calico—until needed in the ceremony, when they are uncovered and laid upon a whole buckskin spread out upon the ground, or, more often now, upon a piece of new cloth furnished by the client, and which is afterward claimed by the priest as the fee for his services.

There are many formulas for conjuring with the beads, and differences also in the details of the ceremony, but the general practice is the same in nearly all cases. Let us suppose that it is performed for the benefit of a man who believes himself to be withering away under a secret spell, or who desires the death of a hated rival.

Priest and client go down together at early daybreak to the river, and take up their position at the point where they can look up-stream while facing the rising sun. The client then wades out to where, in ceremonial language, the water is a "hand-length" in depth and stands silently with his eyes fixed upon the water and his back to the shaman upon the bank, while the latter unfolds upon the sand a white and black cloth, and lays upon the first the red beads—typical of success and his client—and upon the other the black beads, emblematic of death and the intended victim.

The priest now takes a red bead, representing his client, between the thumb and index finger of his right hand, and a black bead, representing the victim, in a like manner, in his left hand. Standing a few feet behind his client he turns toward the east, fixes his eyes upon the bead in his right hand, and addresses it as the *Sá'nikta Gígagét*, the Red Bead, invoking blessings upon his client and clothing him with the red garments of success. The formula is repeated in

a low chant or intonation, the voice rising at intervals, after the manner of a revival speaker. Then, turning to the black bead in his left hand, he addresses it in a similar manner, calling down withering curses upon the head of the victim. Finally looking up, he addresses the stream, under the name of *Yú'ñwí Gúnahíta*, the "Long Man," imploring it to protect his client and raise him to the seventh heaven, where he shall be secure from all his enemies. The other, then stooping down, dips up water in his hand seven times and pours it over his head, rubbing it upon his shoulders and breast at the same time. In some cases he dips completely under seven times, being stript, of course, even when the water is of almost icy coldness. The priest, then stooping down, makes a hole in the ground with his finger, drops into it the fatal black bead, and buries it out of sight with a stamp of his foot. This ends the ceremony.

While addressing the beads the priest attentively observes them as they are held between the thumb and finger of his outstretched hands. In a short time they begin to move, slowly and but a short distance at first, then faster and farther, sometimes coming down as far as the first joint of the finger or even below, with an irregular serpentine motion from side to side, returning in the same manner. Should the red bead be more lively in its movements and come down lower on the finger than the black bead, he confidently predicts for the client the speedy accomplishment of his desire. On the other hand, should the black bead surpass the red in activity, the spells of the shaman employed by the intended victim are too strong, and the whole ceremony must be gone over again with an additional and larger quantity of cloth. This must be kept up until the movements of the red bead give token of success, or until it shows by its sluggish motions or its failure to move down along the finger that the opposing shaman cannot be overcome. In the latter case the discouraged plotter gives up all hope, considering himself as cursed by every imprecation which he has unsuccessfully invoked upon his enemy, goes home and — theoretically — lies down and dies. As a matter of fact, however, the priest is always ready with other formulas by means of which he can ward off such fatal results, in consideration of a sufficient quantity of cloth.

Should the first trial prove unsuccessful, the priest and his client fast until just before sunset. They then eat and remain awake until midnight, when the ceremony is repeated, and if still unsuccessful it may be repeated four times before daybreak, both men remaining awake and fasting throughout the night. If still unsuccessful, they continue to fast all day until just before sundown. Then they eat and again remain awake until midnight, when the previous night's program is repeated. As the enemy and his shaman are supposed



to be industriously working counter-charms all the while, it now becomes a trial of endurance between the two parties, each being obliged to subsist upon one meal per day and abstain entirely from sleep until the result has been decided one way or the other. Failure to endure this severe strain, even so much as closing the eyes in sleep for a few moments, or partaking of the least nourishment excepting just before sunset, neutralizes all the previous work and places the unfortunate offender at the mercy of his more watchful enemy. If the priest be still unsuccessful on the fourth day, he acknowledges himself defeated and gives up the contest. Should his spells prove the stronger, his victim will die within seven days, or, as the Cherokees say, seven nights. These "seven nights," however, are interpreted figuratively, to mean *seven years*, a rendering which often serves to relieve the conjurer from a very embarrassing position.

With regard to the oracle of the ceremony, the beads do move ; but the explanation is simple, although the Indians account for it by saying that the beads become alive by the recitation of the sacred formula. The priest is laboring under strong though suppressed emotion. He stands with his hands stretched out in a constrained position, every muscle tense, his breast heaving and his voice trembling from the effort, and the natural result is that, before he is done praying, his fingers begin to twitch involuntarily and thus cause the beads to move. As before stated, their motion is irregular, but the peculiar delicacy of touch acquired by long practice probably imparts more directness to their movements than would at first seem possible.

We give one of the formulas used in connection with the beads when performing the purification rite for a family preparatory to eating the new corn. It will be noted that the form of the prayer is assertive rather than petitional. In this case, as always in connection with the Green Corn Dance, the principal bead is white, symbolic of health, happiness, and gentle peace ; instead of red, significant of triumph over another. The ceremony is performed for each member of the family in turn, and should the movements of the beads foreshadow sickness to any one of them, the priest at once takes the necessary steps to avert the misfortune.

"THIS IS FOR USING THE BEADS."

*Sgʒ!* O now you have drawn near to listen, O Long Man, in repose. You fail not in anything. My paths lead down to the edge of your body. The white cloth has come and is resting upon the white seats. The white beads are resting upon it (the cloth). The soul restored has now ascended to the first upper world.

In the second upper world, where the white seats have been let down, the white cloth has come and rested upon them. The white beads are resting upon it. The soul restored has now ascended to the second upper world.

In the third upper world, where the white seats have been let down, the white cloth has come and rested upon them. The white beads are resting upon it. The soul restored has now ascended to the third upper world.

In the fourth upper world, where the white seats have been let down, the white cloth has come and rested upon them. The white beads are resting upon it. The soul restored has now ascended to the fourth upper world.

In the fifth upper world, where the white seats have been let down, the white cloth has come and rested upon them. The white beads are resting upon it. The soul restored has now ascended to the fifth upper world.

In the sixth upper world, where the white seats have been let down, the white cloth has come and rested upon them. The white beads are resting upon it. The soul restored has now ascended to the sixth upper world.

In the seventh upper world, where the white seats have been let down, the white cloth has come and rested upon them. The white beads are resting upon it. He is called *thus* (*iyústł*, mentioning name). His soul, made pleasing, has now been examined. His soul has now gone to the seventh upper world and appeared there in full view. He shall recover by degrees. *Yú!*

The next formula, used also in connection with the beads, is rather peculiar, and is intended to ward off the evil presaged by dreams of sudden death, as by falling from a cliff, drowning in the river, or any similar accident. Such dreams are regarded as the result of the hostile conjurations of some secret enemy, and it is believed that the calamity shadowed forth will actually befall unless the proper ceremony is performed to avert it. The client is specially mentioned by name and clan, and the prediction is read from the appearance of the water and the movements of the beads.

"THIS IS WHEN THEY HAVE BAD DREAMS."

*Sgǎ!* His clan is *this* (insert name). He is called *thus* (*iyústł*—name). Evil things were being allotted for him. Where is the assigner of evil located?

*Sgǎ!* Oh, now you have drawn near to listen, O Brown Beaver. Evil was being allotted for him, but now it has been taken away. The body is called *thus*. The evil has been taken away. Where

people are many, there you have gone and allotted that evil shall remain. He is called *thus*. His soul is now released. His soul has now been lifted up. His soul has become renewed. His soul has now been lifted up.

*Sgě!* His clan is *this*. He is called *thus*. Evil things were being allotted for him. Where is the assigner of evil located?

*Sgě!* O White Beaver, reposing up the stream, quickly you have arisen. Evil things were being allotted for him, but now it has been taken away. The evil allotted has now been turned aside. It has been scattered about where people are many. It shall utterly disappear. His soul has now been renewed. His pleasure-filled soul has now been lifted up. In the seventh upper world his soul has now arisen to its full height. *Yá!*

The priest stands upon the bank, while the client, stript of all clothing excepting his shirt, wades out into the shallow water. Before beginning the prayer, the priest inquires of his client to what place he wishes to send the evil foreshadowed in the prophetic dream, for it is held that such dreams must be fulfilled, and that all that the priest can do is to divert their accomplishment from the intended victim. The client names some distant settlement as the place where he wishes the blow to fall, and the priest at once summons the Beaver to bear the "evil thing" (*tsástá*) to that place and leave it there, "where people are many." As every Cherokee settlement is situated upon a stream, and the "evil thing," when exorcised, is thrown into the water, it is quite natural that the Beaver should be chosen to assist in the matter. Should the priest find himself unable to send the calamity so far, the client names some nearer settlement, and a second attempt is made, and so on until a resting place is found for the *tsástá*, even though it be necessary to send it to another clan or family within the settlement of the client himself. These successive trials are made by working the beads, using one color for the client and the other for the vicarious victim, as already described. After each recitation the client stoops and laves his face in the water. When the beads show that the evil is finally banisht, he wades far out into the stream and plunges under seven times. At the seventh plunge, while still under water, he tears the shirt from his body and lets it float down the stream, carrying with it all the evil of the dream, to go where the Beaver wills.

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